

Return Policies for Retail Stores

[Note: This bulletin was prepared by the North Dakota Attorney General's Office and shared with the Iowa Attorney General's Office. It has been adapted slightly, and the points in the bulletin are perfectly relevant for Iowa consumers.]

In Iowa [and North Dakota and most states], there are no state laws specifically regulating return policies, other than the general principle that stores must adhere to any return policies they advertise. Each store may set its own policy. While some stores remain flexible, others have implemented new return policies that make it harder to get a refund.

It is up to you to check the store's refund policy. Usually it is posted near the cash register or customer service area. If the store policy is not posted, ask before buying anything.

Here are some questions to ask:

- Do you need to keep receipts, tags, or packaging for an item?
- Do you have to use credit slips within a specified time?
- Is there a time limit for returns?
- Will the store accept returns of *sale* merchandise?

Many merchants across the nation have been updating their refund policies. Some are becoming more selective about what merchandise may be returned. Often, merchants will not accept returns on big-ticket items, or they may have strict time limits on returns of unopened electronic equipment.

Many of the larger chain retail stores provide "gift receipts" for your purchases. These gift receipts make it easier for the recipient to return a gift.

Refund policies may include a cash refund, an in-store credit, an exchange, or no refund at all. Some stores may require a sales slip when an item is returned. Refunds for closeout or clearance merchandise might be different than for regular-priced merchandise. Some stores may require that returns be made within a specific time period, such as 30 days from the date of purchase. Several of the larger chain stores now require a waiting period of ten days if the original purchase was paid for by personal check. The company will mail the refund check to the consumer once the consumer's original check clears the bank.

Many retailers will not allow any adjustments or returns on special or custom orders. Others will accept a return, but the customer is required to pay a percentage of the cost as restocking charge. So, be extra careful when ordering custom-made items.

Shopping *on-line* may reduce your holiday hassles and certainly avoids the crowds. But before shopping on-line be sure to check the company's return policy -- it may be different from the policy in the store. Some companies do not allow items purchased on-line to be returned to the store location, or may charge a fee for doing so.

Finding the perfect gift can be challenging, but being prepared will reduce your stress if you have to make a trip back to the store to make returns or exchanges. [END]